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Kindle Project at the University of Chester

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Towards the end of 2010, Learning and Information Services (LIS) at the University of Chester decided that we should develop and undertake a pilot project which explored how useful e-readers are in a university setting and if they could help to resolve issues about resource availability. The project team (Fiona McLean, Joanna Shepherd, Jenny Warren) began to look at suitable devices, considering the Amazon Kindle, netbooks and iPads. Kindles were eventually chosen, for their single purpose as e-book readers, long battery life, comparatively low cost and the relative breadth and depth of material in the Kindle bookstore.

Project plan

We intended initially to run the pilot with a distance learning Foundation Degree cohort who had previously reported issues with accessing book stock and other library resources. However, after finding that there was little availability of items on their reading lists in e-book (and particularly Kindle) format, we concluded that another group should be the focus of the project.

Key factors in finding a pilot group were:

- Size of group (we did not want more than about thirty students)
- The need to have buy-in and commitment from programme leaders
- The need to have a subject area where there was good e-book availability (and especially in Kindle format)
- The need to work with a programme which promoted and supported the use of e-books in teaching and learning

With these criteria in mind, the programme leaders for an English Language programme were approached to see if they would be willing for their second year students to be part of the project. Staff were very keen to be involved and it was agreed that the pilot would run for six months.

Project progress

An order for thirty Kindles was placed in late 2010 but we then hit a stumbling block. It became apparent that Kindles were becoming difficult to get hold of as Christmas approached and Amazon would not despatch more than four devices per order. The impact of this was to delay the start date of the project until January 2011.

Once the decision was made to use Kindles, further investigative work into purchasing e-books and what the licences permitted was carried out. A plea for help and clarification went out via listlink and although some useful advice was given it was clear that buying e-books for multiple e-readers would not be straightforward. We also contacted Amazon about the possibility of loading Kindle titles onto more than one device and eventually concluded we were allowed to load each purchased title onto four separate devices. Discussions with the programme leaders yielded additional relevant books in the Kindle store that were not on module reading lists, and we bought a combination of twenty core and background reading titles.

One administrator account was used to buy content for the Kindles. Each copy of the e-books selected had to be purchased separately and then loaded onto four devices at a time. This was incredibly time-consuming, as we had to wait for all four downloads to work successfully before an additional copy of each book could be bought and we also had to keep track of which devices were loading which books (we estimate that it took 200 hours of staff time to load the bought Kindle content). The Kindles being tied to our administrator account meant that the students were unable to buy additional e-book content and add it to the devices themselves, although they could easily add PDF-format documents, such as journal articles. We also loaded the Kindles with four freely available e-books (such as *Pride and Prejudice*) and some PDF-format documents, including library subject and e-resource guides, a referencing style guide and some chapters that had been scanned under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agency licence for the modules these students were taking. We added this additional content to try to make the Kindles as useful as we could for our pilot group of students. We also created intranet pages to support the project and our users, with links to YouTube videos about using the readers, as well as an FAQ page.

We devised questionnaires for our pilot – one to be completed at the start of the project and one at its end. The initial questionnaire was designed to capture quantitative and qualitative data about our student group, asking about their use of print materials, their level of IT skills, and their use of e-books, for example. It also asked about their views and expectations of the project before it started – if they could see any benefits or drawbacks to using a Kindle for their academic work and how else LIS could use Kindles. We hoped that the two questionnaires would give us enough comparable information to gauge the effectiveness of the project.

We arranged with one of the programme leaders to take over a core module lecture to launch the project with the students, during which we gave each student a Kindle (with a charger and quick start guide) and a protective cover, and explained the project to them. We showed them how to use the Kindles and also pointed them towards the intranet support pages we'd written. Each student then completed a questionnaire.

Initial questionnaire

The results of that initial questionnaire are as follows:

Twenty three students participated in the project and all students claimed to have moderate to excellent IT skills. The average age of the group was 20 and 13% of the group were male and 87% female. All of the students said they made regular use of the library to borrow books: 78% of the group borrowed books not found on their reading lists and 65% of the group liked to use e-books. Only one student owned a Kindle already.

Of the 23 participants, only one student thought that they would not use the Kindle for their academic work. The students' main reasons for considering using the Kindles were the ease of having multiple resources in one place and convenience (especially when travelling). The group particularly liked that fact that they could access additional texts on top of their library loan allocation. Students also saw the devices as being environmentally friendly, cutting down on the need for paper-based resources.

Some students were concerned that the Kindles would break easily, being lightweight and 'flimsy' and others were worried that they would lose any notes they had made if a device stopped working. They also saw other drawbacks for academic work – that interacting with the text (especially when note taking) can be awkward and that you can't print from Kindles.

The students felt that they would use the Kindles primarily for carrying out research for their assignments, in particular for highlighting relevant quotes and chapters. Half of the participants thought that they would use the devices to make notes and for revision purposes.

64% of the participants thought that e-books would not replace the need for printed books in the future – that 'people will always admire the authenticity and quality of books' and 'hard copy books are still around and still just as popular today despite modern day technology'. Other students commented that people prefer books as they can write on them, fold the pages over and that they don't require batteries. The group saw Kindles as supplementing the library's printed collection rather than replacing it.

The students were then sent away from the initial session with the Kindles and returned them from June 2011 onwards. They were asked to complete a final questionnaire about their Kindle project experience.

Final questionnaire

The results of the final questionnaire are as follows:

16 of the 23 participants returned their final questionnaire and 80% of these students said that they had used their Kindle during the project. The group were asked if they had used the Kindle in the same way that they thought they would at the start of the project. 37% said that they had used the Kindle as they had anticipated, finding it most useful when travelling – one participant also commented that they had enjoyed using the 'text to voice' feature. The remaining 63% of

the students said that they hadn't used the Kindle as much as they had expected to, with most saying that they found that they preferred to use e-books on their laptops or PCs instead.

When asked if they thought that participating in the Kindle project had a positive impact on their academic work, only 31% of the group said that they felt they had benefited, finding the devices quick and easy to use and good for carrying about – they also liked being able to access multiple texts without visiting the library. One student commented that the Kindles offered a 'very exciting and modern approach to reading and revision'.

69% of the group said that their academic work had not benefited from using the Kindle. A number of students said that the devices were frustrating to use and that they could only access one book at a time whereas they could access multiple texts at once via laptops or PCs. Some students commented that they found the range of texts on the device quite limited and that they had still made use of the library's resources.

The majority of students said that they had really appreciated being able to make use of the Kindle and had enjoyed taking part in the project, but most of the students did not see the Kindle as replacing their need to access print or e-resources via the library. Students commented that the Kindles provided 'a sense of what it could be like for future students' and 'a different way to research and study rather than taking books out of a library'. However, the project had not inspired any of the students to buy their own Kindle.

Results

The results of this project, therefore, showed us that Kindles were not as useful as we envisaged in our academic environment. However, various factors may have affected these students' reactions to the Kindles. They were a campus-based group, and so able to access our physical resources easily. They were also studying a subject traditionally focused on working with books, and will have had long practice of working that way in their previous study experiences. It was not possible for them to add more bought e-book content on to the Kindles and this may have limited their appeal and usefulness. The students seemed to prefer accessing e-books via laptops or PCs. This possibly says something about the way that current students work – that they flip between areas of interest more quickly than students used to and can deal with distractions, or don't even consider them to be distractions.

Four Kindles came back with broken/frozen screens – a failure rate high enough to warrant concern if they're ever used on a wider basis.

Conclusions

We found that campus-based students in a book-based subject did not find enormous value in using material given to them on Kindles. It would be interesting to see if distance learners or non-campus based students found the same results, as they can experience issues with accessing physical academic resources. The parameters that the project has in terms of cohort size, lecturer

buy-in, and, just as importantly, relevant academic text availability in Kindle format, may make finding an appropriate group difficult to find, but we hope to investigate this in the future.